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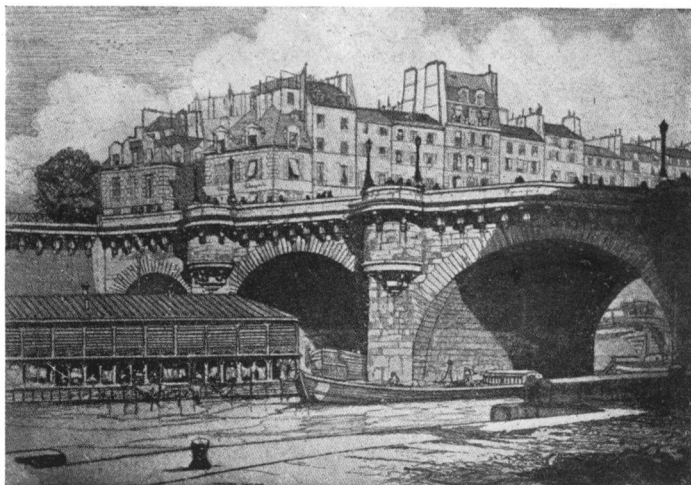
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ART AND PROGRESS

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LE PONT NEUF. PARIS

THE ETCHINGS OF HERMAN A. WEBSTER

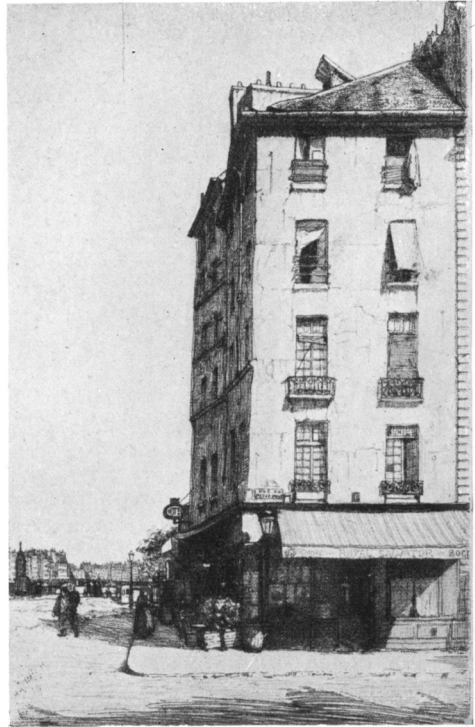
BY FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.

MORE than a year ago I was sitting in the friendly half-light of a neighbor's library when my eye fell upon an unfamiliar print across the room. "You've been buying a Meryon," I exclaimed. "Not so bad as that," was the answer. A few steps brought me before Herman A. Webster's *Pont Neuf* and I read for the first time a name that has not ceased to interest me. The next day I acquainted myself with all of Webster's work at his New York printseller's and possessed myself of several plates which have proved to be an enduring delight. Of course, as I soon learned, I was merely behind the times. While I had been vegetating in Italy, far from gossip about contemporary art, Webster had slipped into fame. *The Gazette des Beaux-Arts* had

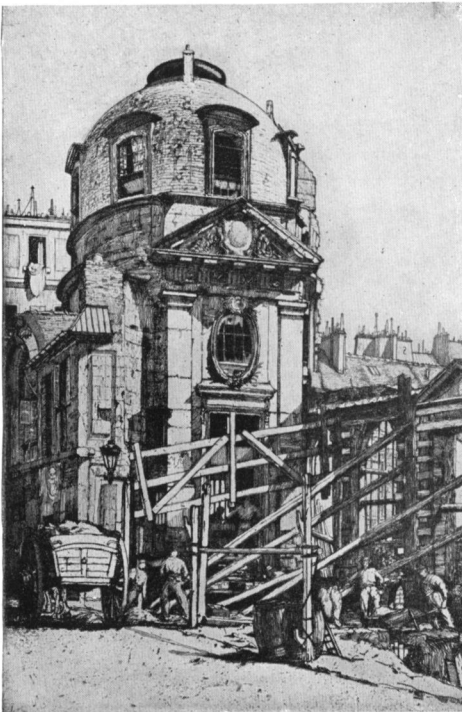
published him, the *Studio* had extended its preliminary genialities, the International Society of London had made him a member. His story, I found, was an exceptional one. He hailed from Chicago and had approached etching by way of Yale College and ungrateful business and journalistic employments. At last he had made his escape to Paris, where the magic of the place and the prints of Charles Mervon soon converted the vague aspirant at Julian's into an accomplished etcher. My rash guess on the *Pont Neuf* print had not been so far out.

Webster has been etching a matter of four years and in that time he has mastered the technic of the needle, the acid bath, and the press. There is, in fact, except for the beginner's salutary tendency

rather to find his pictures than to create them, disconcertingly little of the novice about his work. Sketching in Paris and the Gothic towns of Northern France and Spain he has resolutely set himself against all difficulties of architectural form and texture, and his needle has unfailingly responded to the need. Study carefully the detail of the *Pont Neuf* or, better yet, of the admirable print the *Quai Montebello* and you will see that he commands already the devices that are usually won by years and toil. It may not be amiss to dwell on certain technical merits of his work touching lightly the less definite matter of its pictorial quality. Aside from that instinctive adaptation of line to texture and direction which has already been noted, Webster commands a shadow which though lustrous and deep is always transparent. It is made up of lines and not of a smear of ink. Look into any open windows in his street scenes, study the strong



SUR LE QUAI MONTEBELLO, PARIS



ANCIENNE FACULTÉ DE MÉDECINE, PARIS

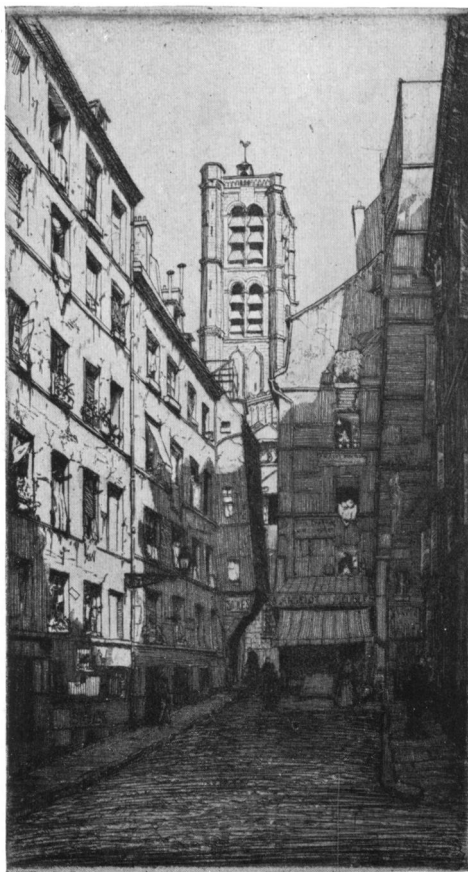
shadows under the arches of the *Pont Neuf*, or better take that remarkable shadow full of reflected sunlight which is cast by an awning in the *Quai Montebello*. Quite as remarkable are the light portions of his plates. In fact, if I had to represent him by a single detail I should choose that skeletonized row of old houses that rises pale beyond the *Pont Neuf*. There they stand, white against an equally white sky, existent by the sheer rightness and force of thin outlines that yet tell enough of weight and mass. If anybody thinks it is easy to establish this characteristic bit of Paris with these tenuous means let him try to copy or even to trace the row. It is a passage where the slightest overemphasis would spell confusion, where a moment's hesitation would bring insipidity. Such successful pianissimo passages are frequent in the prints, and they carry the work beyond that mere painstaking which one expects in a talented beginner—into the realm of inspira-

tion. It is interesting to note that in these tense linear passages Webster had very little to learn from his avowed model Meryon. At a guess, Joseph Pennell may have supplied a hint, or Albrecht Dürer's backgrounds may have aided both the younger and the older contemporary. What is important is that Webster has made of the firm thin line a personal means of expression. In the few instances in which Meryon divorces line from tone the effect is sinister. Webster makes these airy scaffoldings a symbol of the blithe dignity of Paris—of the confidence with which she offers her simple and graceful contours to her silvery skies.

Webster's show-piece is unquestionably the *Pont Neuf*. By its patient yet master-



TOLEDO



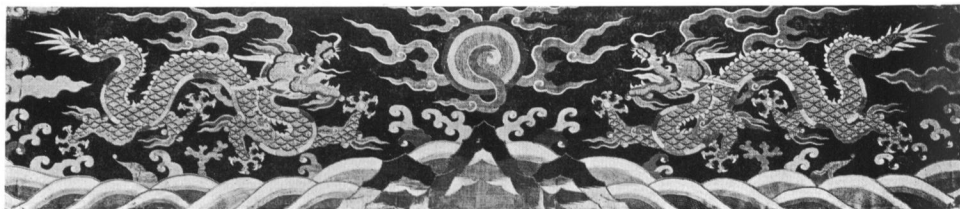
LA RUE GRENIER SUR L'EAU. PARIS

ful indications of timber, masonry, cordage, foliage; by its primary contrast of shadowed arches with oblong sunlit buildings and slipping, radiant current, it must delight both the minute and the detached observer. Yet I doubt if it is the best of the etchings. Which is I do not pretend to say. *St. Martin's Bridge, Toledo*, is more charged with feeling. Many will prefer the sun-flecked, crumbling picturesqueness of the Norman courtyard of the *Blanchisseuses*. It has a sure briskness of execution surpassed by none of the other plates. Again the print *Old Houses Rue de Hautefeuille* is full of technical felicities and breathes the very spirit of the Paris that vanishes. Like Meryon, Webster has saved for us historic buildings about to disappear. His print of the *Old School of Medicine* has this pathetic interest. It is quite marvelous in its sure handling of perplexing detail, of scaffoldings, grilles and the like, and excellent in its suggestion of the shabby old houses that crowded this stately monument. The drawing, exceptionally, is not

quite sure, and, as in several of the plates, there are too many objects. Still one who wished Webster in his least conventional and reminiscent vein might well choose it. It has the cardinal merit of mood and dignity. My own choice among the prints is *The Quai Montebello*. I love it for its sunniness, for the shimmering transparency of the shadow at the base of the building, for the reticent tact with which the settling of the walls and the sagging of rafters under their tiles have been suggested, for its expression of the great spaces along the Seine, and finally for a quite exquisite rhythm and balance of its simple rectangular forms. It confirms, too, old memories of loiterings along the quays when one drank in the discreet elation, the quiet and almost shabby elegance, the pervasive, civilized amenity that is old Paris. The linear foundation of this apparently prosaic subject is modulated with utmost sensitiveness.

Webster has had the advantages and disadvantages of having his artistic awakening and first fulfilment in Paris. Like so many other American pilgrims

he has yielded himself utterly to the spell of that lovely city, and she has generously rewarded his devotion. It is an experience that is likely either to make a man an adoptive Parisian, uprooting him, or else to leave him somewhat an exile for his remaining days. A robust talent must overcome this feeling of banishment and adjust itself to other skies. Such a period of reorientation is often difficult. By a rather cruel paradox precisely the most uneasy place to get your artistic second wind may be your native land. Webster remains, where he was two years ago, the joyous interpreter of old France, and in particular of Paris. It remains to be seen whether the beginnings of his rare talent—rare technically and in sensitiveness to the genius of place—have also once for all set its limitations. This I will not believe. Webster has done too much to accept a measure that would be adequate for many an artist. I expect to see him enlarge upon his Paris triumphs in new fields, and I want him to justify me in mistaking for a Meryon the first Webster that came under my eye.



A RARE PIECE OF CHINESE TAPESTRY

CHINESE TAPESTRIES AND EMBROIDERIES

A SPECIAL EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS IN BOSTON

BY DENMAN W. ROSS

THE readers of ART AND PROGRESS will be interested to know of an exhibition of Chinese textiles, tapestries and embroideries, to be seen at the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston. It is, without doubt, the most important exhibition of its kind

ever held in this country, and no one passing through Boston during the summer should miss seeing it.

Some of the examples shown have been purchased in this country, in New York and in San Francisco, but most of them